

November 2020

Recoding The Archive: Memory And Identity In The Photographic And Filmic Works Of Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, And Alia Ali

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**RECODING THE ARCHIVE: MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN
THE PHOTOGRAPHIC AND FILMIC WORKS OF SHIRIN
NESHAT, SHOJA AZARI, AND ALIA ALI**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Art History

by
Olivia K. Johnson
B.G.S., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2018
December 2020

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I must thank my brilliant professors Dr. Ludovico Geymonat, Dr. William Ma, and Dr. Darius Spieth for imparting their knowledge and guidance onto me during my time at LSU. I must also thank Dr. Christopher Bennett of University of Louisiana at Lafayette for exposing me to much of the work that appears here and inspiring me to continue my studies. And most special thanks go to my advisor Dr. Allison Young for her exceptional guidance and patience, without which this text would not exist.

I would like to acknowledge my family, friends, and coworkers for their support, encouragement, and great patience. Thanks also to the kids of Degraffi C.S. for being my soundtrack during many hours of writing and re-writing. And last but not least, the biggest thanks of all go to my partner Blaine for his unending support in all my endeavors. No words can fully capture my appreciation.

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Abstract

Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, and Alia Ali are artists of Middle Eastern descent living and working in the United States, mainly in photographic and filmic modes. Neshat and Azari were born in Iran and immigrated to the U.S. amid the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which drastically changed the political and cultural landscape of the country. Ali was born in Yemen but her father is specifically South Yemeni and her mother Yugoslavian, two countries that no longer exist. As artists experiencing exile and diaspora, with complicated relationships to their home countries, their identities are muddled by hybridity and the struggle between being connected to home through memory but seeing a different landscape represented through Western media. By creating photographs and films that serve to reconnect the artists with their homes or their Middle Eastern identities, the artists awaken memories not accepted, or even suppressed by mass media and the West. As media frequently used to preserve memories, the works of Neshat, Ali, and Azari use photography and film to instead “create” new ones. In effect, Neshat, Azari, and Ali “recode” the archive; the artists apply media-created languages of stereotype and appropriate media connected to their cultures in order to re-appropriate their individual histories—private memories—into the official history.

Introduction

Memories are a place to dwell, but not a place to reside. By their very nature, memories are unstable, unclear, and untrustworthy. They change as time passes, becoming foggier and less rooted in reality. Contemporary artists Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, and Alia Ali explore and uncover their memories through photographic and filmic works, which are complicated by the degradation of both time and distance, as the artists live in exile and diaspora. By performing images of an alternate self and staging return journeys made impossible by conflict, Neshat, Azari, and Ali simultaneously assume and challenge the idealizing and othering circumstances of diasporic living.

Born in 1957 in Qazvin, Iran, Shirin Neshat was in her early 20s during the Iranian Revolution. Contrary to the post-Revolution rules on veiling and gender separations that continue today, Neshat remembers a more liberal Iran, with unveiled women and raised hemlines concurrent with fashion trends in the West.¹ Born to an even more liberal father, who believed in sending sons *and* daughters abroad to study, Neshat had already left Qazvin to join her sisters for schooling in California and was in America when the 1979 Revolution occurred.² With Ayatollah Khomeini designated leader and Iran swiftly mandating conservative practices following fundamental Islam, Neshat chose to remain in the United States to continue her education and did not return to Iran for over a decade.³ The impacts of the Revolution—which abandoned dynastic rule, established Ayatollah Khomeini as supreme leader, and ushered in the Islamic Republic (somewhat a misnomer)—were economic, political, and cultural, and

¹ Shoja Azari, “Shoja Azari with Phong Bui,” *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2010.

² Scott MacDonald, “Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 625.

³ Ibid.

drastically altered life in Iran for all.⁴ The particular effects for women and the role of women in the Revolution is especially influential to Neshat; themes of both oppression and liberation are prominent in Neshat's work, of which the photographic series *Women of Allah* and the video work *Rapture* will be discussed in the following chapters. These contradictions—modern versus traditional, free versus oppressed—shape Neshat's visual language and reflect the artist's own contradictory experiences of home.

Shoja Azari was born in the same year, but in Shiraz, Iran, and also experienced the heightening liberalization of Iran until 1979. Unlike Neshat, Azari lived excitedly through the Revolution in Iran. Having already immigrated to the United States for his education, he purposefully returned to Iran after the overthrow of the Shah to experience what he describes as the anarchistic aftermath of a country shifting between two diametrically opposed ways of life.⁵ The artist was very politically active and vocally critical of the theocracy in early 1980s Iran, which eventually led to his feeling of unsafety and final migration to the United States.⁶ Still politically involved, Azari says, "I never attempt to make a work of art that is political in nature, but anything I do becomes political by its very nature, because of my personality and my interest in human dilemma and justice."⁷

The political and cultural tensions of Azari's identity, made hybrid by his status as exile, is evident in his works, which often evoke and even directly utilize images of violence and destruction in the media. Working mainly in film and video, Azari's visual language borrows

⁴ Jeffrey W. Robbins, "Iranian Revolution Redux," *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 98-99.

⁵ "Shoja Azari with Phong Bui."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nazy Belgari, "Art to Art: Shirin Neshat and Shoja Azari," *Harper's Bazaar Art Arabian*, November-December 2013, 99.

images from Persian culture. In their works, Neshat and Azari both continually reference Iran and Islam as a means of reconnecting to home from amidst the diaspora.

Alia Ali is of a younger generation and her identity is strongly marked by the disappearance of her two countries of origin, being paternally South Yemeni and maternally Yugoslavian.⁸ Both regions have been reabsorbed and accessioned into different territories. Having also been born in Yemen, raised mainly in the United States, and split her time as an adult between the States and Morocco, Ali cannot identify strongly with any single place of origin; she is instead shaped by a multitude of cultures and languages.

Ali's photographic practice is reflective of her transnational identity as she centralizes various textiles and styles of dress in her portrait-style works. The artist plays with the language of textile: how it defines us and how we define ourselves by it. Yet, as a person whose cultural identity evades singular definition, Ali also defects from the practice of self-identification through dress.

The comparison of Neshat and Azari naturally exposes connections—so much is similar about the artists' lives and experiences of home, including its geographical place. While the political and cultural specifics of Iran will necessarily be referenced throughout this text, they are not intended to be its core. Not a scholar of Iranian studies, I will instead take the position of Western perception and address the impact of Western images that impose “their” Middle East upon the artists.⁹ Furthermore, by bringing Ali, whose origins are not so easily defined, into conversation with Neshat and Azari, a narrative emerges that transcends place. In consistently

⁸ Alia Ali, Artist Statement, *alia-ali.com*, 2020.

⁹ Meaning, Western ideas about the Middle East are not necessarily rooted in fact or broad understanding, but are entrenched in fear and often outright misunderstanding.

cogitating the three artists in relation to each other, the broader experiences of diaspora, displacement, and hybridity are illuminated.

The depth or conceptual range of extant scholarly literature varies drastically between the three artists. The work of Shirin Neshat, a superstar artist and filmmaker who has won numerous awards, including the prestigious Golden Lion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, has naturally been written about extensively. Shoja Azari, who is a large part of Neshat's creative team and has achieved some solo success, has a moderate amount of literature but is lacking in intensive scholarship. Very little has been written on the work of Alia Ali, a younger artist with a successful but still budding career, outside of exhibition announcements and critical reviews. This text seeks to do more than simply increase literature, however. Texts on Neshat and Azari especially, while generally focused on their Iranian histories, position their works as more universally performative. They rarely elaborate extensively on the artists' techniques or their broader (non-Iranian) contexts, such as how their works are situated in an American contemporary or the larger world of cinema. This text satisfies all these aims by addressing their personal experiences of exile and diaspora, as expected, but also some theoretical frameworks for the artists' photographic and filmic works that go beyond the diaspora.

As mentioned, while deeply artist-centric, this text favors the methodology of the global contemporary over social history focused on place. This frame of thinking about and categorizing art emerged in the 1990s, amid a "transnational turn," and somewhat follows a postcolonial methodology.¹⁰ The consideration of contemporary art as an inherently global one acknowledges the itinerancy of identity, or as Stuart Hall offers, "identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside,

¹⁰ Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010): 375.

representation.”¹¹ This assertion of Hall’s echoes this text’s chief concern: how three artists of transnational, unstable identities grapple with how they are represented and how they self-represent. As artists living in the United States, they are subject to the oversimplified representations of broadly “Middle Eastern” identities in mass media, lacking the nuance of any individual culture. The resulting images are of mixed messages and reflect the instability of identity that results from transnationalism, particularly from a place of exile and diaspora. Artists of infinite cultural identities, not just Iran or Yemen, address these essential issues of global contemporary art: Pushpamala N., Yinka Shonibare, and Chris Ofili, to name just a few.

Chapter 1 focuses on Neshat and Ali’s photographic works, both of which reference traditions such as studio portraiture and self-portraiture, yet do not fully satisfy the requirements of either genre. Using Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin’s more poetic theories on photography, which attest to photography’s essence of truth, the chapter demonstrates how Neshat and Ali craft images in the style of portraits to assert their alternate truths, recoding the Western-accepted (or created) archive of their countries of origins, particularly images of their women.

Chapter 2 focuses on the films and cinematographic installations of Neshat and Azari. Continuing the idea of recoding images, the chapter discusses how the artists’ filming on location may signify substitute return journeys to Iran. In asking why artists of diaspora so frequently choose the filmic medium, the text engages with Laura U. Marks’ 2000 publication

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222.

The Skin of the Film, which examines film's—and the act of creating it's—power to awaken memory, repositioning “private memory” against “official history.”¹²

Finally, Chapter 3 addresses the appropriation of traditions, texts, images, and textiles from each artist's specific culture, a dominant theme across existing literature on these artists. Pushing this notion further, however, the section aims to confront the artists' acts of appropriation as a means of excavation—another method through which to reveal the personal through the universal. In service of creating an Islamic contemporary, the artists both broaden the view of Middle Eastern histories—beyond narratives of mass media—and assert a more personal view that prioritizes the individual experience.

On a broader scale, this text probes the connective nature between photographic and filmic images and memories. A medium frequently used to preserve memories, the works of Neshat, Ali, and Azari use it instead to “create” new ones. Rather, they produce images that reflect memories not accepted, or even suppressed by mass media and the West. While a desire to create such personal, excavatory images is not unique to artists living in diaspora—making art is a therapeutic, reparative process for many—the weight of memories marred by revolution, war, and exile, is heavier, and makes the practice of recoding the archive essential.

¹² Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 60.

Chapter 1.

Self/Portrait: Issues of Identity and Photography

Hints of a body beneath a black-and-white herringbone robe suggest a seated subject, with left leg crossed over the right, knees stacked, and hands in lap. The figure's posture causes their body to be very slightly cocked away from the camera, but otherwise the subject addresses the viewer straight on. The details of the sitter's pose are hard to discern because they are so loosely swathed in the monochrome textile. In fact, the entire subject is draped in fabric; the subject wears a turban of the black and white fabric on their head, and their face is wrapped in a brightly colored damask-style fabric that matches the backdrop of the photo. There is no indication of gender, age, or ethnicity of the sitter, aside from cultural associations with the turban-style headwear that they sport; yet, even *this* is ambiguous, as the contemporary and commercial quality of the textiles combat any direct indications of cultural association.

This photograph (fig. 1) by Alia Ali is indicative of her practice: steeped in questions of identity by her use of textiles, differing dress styles, and portrait compositions. In their photographic practices, both Alia Ali and Shirin Neshat make reference to traditional forms of studio portraiture and therefore the histories such forms carry with them. Further complicating their ideas of portraits, Ali and Neshat incorporate their own bodies and likenesses. But while seeming to create portraits and self-portraits, the artists actually present characters or stereotypes, themselves playing roles. With these concerns in mind, this section will explore the ways in which contemporary artists Neshat and Ali deploy the photographic medium and portrait genre to capitalize on the archival quality of photographs in order to present *their* truth in light of questions surrounding identity, memory, diaspora, and representation.



Figure 1. Alia Ali, ; (+/-), 2017, pigment print on cotton rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 135 x W. 90 cm.

Theories on Photographic Portraits

Portrait-making was the first mainstream adaptation of photography following Louis Daugerre's invention.¹³ The portrait as a memento was, for the first time, accessible to a wide array of socioeconomic levels and studio portraiture quickly became a popular commercial endeavor.¹⁴ Still a common practice, these are similar images stylized to capture the essence of their subjects.

¹³ Roswell Angier, "Portrait/Self-Portrait, Face/No Face," *Train Your Gaze: A Practical and Theoretical Introduction to Portrait Photography*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fairchild Books, 2015), 13.

¹⁴ Ibid.

These photographs minimize background and emphasize the face, considered “the essential sign of identity.”¹⁵ And yet, as photography was adapted by fine artists, the face became less and less important, even as the presence of the artist through self-portraits entered into the narrative plane.¹⁶ And while human subjects remain—some compositions even closely resembling portraiture—history’s focus on encapsulating the essence of the individual into a single image has fallen away. In adapting photographic traditions, contemporary artists complicate issues of representation.

The writings of Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin famously consider what it means to photograph, be photographed, and consume photographs. Barthes’s musings are particularly tied to portraits and mementos, as he uses a photograph of his mother to analyze his grieving of her in *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes, “Photography’s inimitable feature is that someone has seen the referent *in flesh and blood*, or again *in person*... The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.”¹⁷ Thus, the particular photograph of his mother as a child, for instance, to which Barthes continuously refers, is treasured for the way in which it captures not simply his mother’s likeness, but the specific “rays which emanated from...her hair, her skin, her dress, her gaze, *on that day*.”¹⁸ Even a photograph depicting a figure whom Barthes does not know, from centuries ago, likewise possesses a specificity of persona that provides a connection to the very literal, concrete past.

Benjamin’s concept of “aura” helps to validate Barthes’s perceptions. While Benjamin was primarily concerned with examining the question of originality in relation to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 79-80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 82.

mechanically reproducible images (photographs), his assertions nonetheless confirm Barthes's feelings. For Benjamin, images (or objects, or natural elements) cast an aura—a "sense" of their creators and the rituals through which they were made. In some sense, the reproducibility of photographs in relation to the aura of their *subjects* is a non-issue. A photographic image remains unchanged throughout reproduction (from a negative), and possesses as much of its subject in the tenth printing as the first. The photograph immortalizes some moment of life or performance of the subject, and continues to emit its meaning throughout the life of the image. Barthes's and Benjamin's ideas about the photographic subject certainly begin to explain humanity's desire to take and consume photographs—its cult value, to Benjamin. We create portraits in order to capture the likeness and personality of loved ones, and to treasure beyond just "that day," as Barthes says.¹⁹ The inclusion of these theorists in a discussion of photography is compulsory, if hasty, but as this text leans heavily on more recent theories, such as Laura Marks's in Chapter 2, Benjamin in particular will come further into relevance.

Shirin Neshat, *Women of Allah*

Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* series of photographs, made from 1993 to 1997 feature several women, yet they profile no *particular* woman. The artist defines her images through a narrow symbolic language: veil, script, and guns. Using the specifically Iranian elements of the chador veil and Farsi script, Neshat confronts stereotypical markers of female Iranian identity. That is, symbols the Western media use to create a singular image, or stereotype, of the violent Muslim woman.

Neshat's 1994 photograph *Rebellious Silence* (fig. 2) is one of the earliest and most iconic images from *Women of Allah*. In keeping with the traditional compositional format of

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 7.

portraiture, the photograph is cropped in closely on the sitter's face and shoulders. Framed by a solid black chador—the long cloak that many Iranian women wrap around their heads and pin under the chin to envelop the whole body—the subject's face floats amid black fabric. The long barrel of a gun divides the photograph and the subject's face in half. After the photograph's printing, Neshat inscribes the surface of the image with Farsi text, which appears to cover the subject's face. Here, Neshat has left only the eyes untouched, as the subject confronts the viewer with direct eye contact. The eyes would typically be the only part of an Iranian woman's face that is fully visible in public; as Neshat highlights in her work, they are an essential point of contact between the sexes.²⁰ However, Neshat subdues any agency remaining in the figure's eyes by clouding her body with symbols of cultural stereotype, contradicting the supposed purpose of portraits: to individuate their subjects.

²⁰ See Neshat's 2000 video work *Fervor*.



Figure 2. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence (Women of Allah)*, 1994, black and white RC print and ink, photo by Cynthia Preston.

In another image, without Neshat's specific language, the female subject and her identity might be the main focus. But as Neshat inscribes Iranian Modernist poetry across the subject's face, the image's focus on identity, and therefore its designation as a portrait, falls away. In describing Neshat's images, David Lawton notes ways in which the artist "violates taboos" and mixes symbols of religion and symbols of violence "to disturb stereotypes rather than reinforce

them.”²¹ Lawton proposes that Neshat’s application, and subversion, of a portrait praxis provides a point of empathy and connection for the audience.

A key factor of *Rebellious Silence* has yet to be discussed, however: the subject of the photograph is Neshat herself. While Neshat did hire another model or two for some *Women of Allah* images, the majority of the works feature the artist as subject, and occasionally even her own young son. Because the works are so uniform in their language and deliberately create distance between the viewer and the identity of the subject, that the images may be read as self-portraits adds another layer of reference and meaning to Neshat’s image-making.

On one hand, Neshat’s use of her own body may have been a choice made out of necessity or ease, as *Women of Allah* was the artist’s first real foray into image-making. Neshat studied studio art and received her MFA at University of California Berkeley, but describes her early work as mediocre; she essentially abandoned art-making after finishing her education until her return to Iran in 1990, which sparked the creation of her *Women of Allah* series.²² Although the artist is frequently described as a photographer, she actually had no experience with the medium when she initiated *Women of Allah*, so she instead hired photographers to assist with the technical image-capture under her direction. Because she approached the series with a sense of experimentation, using her own body seems like a natural choice for Neshat. Moreover, acting as subject may have allowed Neshat to retain a greater sense of artistic agency as image-maker or director, while she outsourced the actual image capturing. In an interview for *Harper’s Bazaar Art*, Neshat speaks to this ambivalence, explaining, “I think it’s a very complicated thing, when

²¹ David Lawton, “Defaced: The Art of Blaspheming Texts and Images in the West,” *Profane: Sacreligious Expression in a Multicultural Age*, eds. Christopher S. Grenda, Chris Beneke, David Nash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 98.

²² MacDonald, “Between Two Worlds,” 625.

the artist becomes the subject of his or her own work...I'm not sure if I want my work to be so much a statement about me."²³

While Neshat's visual language within the *Women of Allah* series appears to be heavily rooted in stereotypical, reductive symbols, Aphrodite Navab suggests that Neshat's use of her own likeness, embedded with such symbols, is actually simultaneously reconstructive and deconstructive.²⁴ Approaching the Iranian woman from the position of revolutionary and martyr, Neshat subversively associates her contemporaneous woman with the symbols that now, with a Western post-9/11 eye, seem critical of exactly this reductive view.²⁵ In playing that role, in other words, Neshat wants to identify with it—her own version of the revolutionary woman. Navab acknowledges this aspect of her work, but asserts that in addition to these practices, Neshat and other artists who similarly experience racial or cultural stereotyping by their audiences “use the camera to develop a telling-self.” As she explains, “by literally and metaphorically engaging the public in seeing alternative realities and histories, these artist-philosophers offer an alternative of historical collaboration, cultural knowledge, and political flexibility.”²⁶ In short, Neshat's engagement with her audience's expected presentation of self is not a way *to* her identity, but a way *through*. “She is an active protagonist traveling back and forth in search of a location that makes sense to her.”²⁷

And indeed, as an Iranian exile living in the United States, the artist does not necessarily define or represent herself as Iranian in quite the same way as her images would suggest. The overt stylization of her self-portraits—Arthur Danto pointedly uses the term “costume”—has

²³ Belgari, “Art to Art,” 99.

²⁴ Aphrodite Desiree Navab, “Unsayings Life Stories: The Self-Representational Art of Shirin Neshat and Ghazel,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41, no. 2. (Summer 2007): 41.

²⁵ MacDonald, “Between Two Worlds,” 626.

²⁶ Navab, “Unsayings Life Stories,” 41-42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

been compared against the notorious staged photographs of artists like Cindy Sherman.²⁸ Unlike Neshat, Sherman's identity is almost completely obscured as the artist becomes another woman—often an actress who also “plays” a character—under the guise of addressing clichéd representations of women in popular culture, as in her *Untitled Film Still* series (fig. 3). In Sherman's work, it is clear (to Danto, at least) that the artist “did not especially identify with the women she portrayed herself as,” yet Neshat seemed connected nonetheless with the role of revolutionary or martyr.²⁹ In portraying women whose bodies are intertwined with guns among other politically charged motifs, Neshat evokes the general role that revolution, war, and violence have had in shaping many Iranian women's lives, while also more specifically referencing female Shiite revolutionaries.



Figure 3. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978, gelatin silver print, H. 19 x W. 24 cm, Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel, Museum of Modern Art New York 830.1995.

²⁸ Arthur C. Danto, “Shirin Neshat and the Concept of the Absolute Spirit,” *Shirin Neshat* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010), 9, 13.

Interestingly, Sherman was one of the first buyers of Neshat's work, having purchased a *Women of Allah* photograph at one of the artist's first exhibitions of the series.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Neshat, of course, played no active role herself in the Iranian Revolution, or in any subsequent movements in Iran, as she has been living in America since 1974 and has not even visited Iran in two decades or more.³⁰ Had the artist not traveled to the United States for university, she likely would have been active in liberal protests and the counter-Revolution from 1979 on to today. The women that Neshat portrays, whether played by herself or not, represent not just women in Iran, but the alternate life the artist could have had. “In a way, this work is my way of discovering and re-identifying with the new Iran,” says Neshat.³¹ Having been so disconnected from her home country during a pivotal moment of change, returning to Iran for the first time in sixteen years was startling for the artist, who left behind a more progressive Iran.³² So while staging herself in these images may have partly been a logistical choice, Neshat’s insertion of herself into the role of the contemporary Iranian woman also seems a necessary therapeutic choice for the artist, in coming to terms with her estrangement from this new Iran. In this way, these images are not self-portraits at all, because they certainly do not portray Neshat as herself, but instead the artist performing a role. Or, perhaps the images present an alternate self, one that remains connected with Iran or which brings to the surface Neshat’s suppressed identity as she was unavoidably Westernized through her young adult years in the United States.

Alia Ali, *Under Thread*

While *Women of Allah* subverts the tradition of portraiture by creating a stereotype or common image of a woman, rather than a memorable image of the individual, Alia Ali’s portraits completely destroy the practice. The images of many series by Ali clearly build upon the genre of studio portraiture; yet, as with Neshat’s series, they eschew the desire to represent specificity.

³⁰ Ebrahimi, Mehraneh, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 106.

³¹ Shirin Neshat, *Women of Allah: Secret Identities, Grand Street*, no. 62. (Fall 1997): 145.

³² MacDonald, “Between Two Worlds,” 626.

Ali works intimately with textiles, which constitute a common visual element throughout a succession of her series made between 2015 and 2019. While she presents figures seated in traditional portrait poses, they are fully covered in a variety of fabrics, their faces included. Ali's photographs make an excellent foil to Neshat's, as the two approach a similar artistic thesis through opposing compositions.

Unlike Neshat's images, however, Ali completely obscures the identity of her subject. Ali does not even include basic symbols or accessories through which the viewer can estimate a sense of the sitter's identity, as Neshat does; rather, she intentionally removes their identity and all accompanying associations. Where Neshat seems intent on building a stereotype, Ali removes any tools by which a viewer might do so. And while Ali may be the sitter for many of these images, the actual identity of the subjects is unimportant.³³ Using the composition of studio portraiture, Ali's obfuscation of identity makes images that, while representative, cannot be true portraits. As potential self-portraits, in fully covering herself the artist refuses to connect her image with the cultures represented in cloth. This disconnection between the subject and the viewer that Ali intentionally creates suggests the artist's conceptual engagement with role-playing. By disembodiment her face—her identity, as history would have it—from the body and textile presented, the viewer cannot assume that the artist represents her true self. She is then freed of the burden of fulfilling a particular role and can instead try on many.

The series *Under Thread* diverges from Ali's typical photographic conventions in a way that more closely aligns with a portraiture practice. Here, Ali's visage is identifiable and while still traversing in the language of textile, the artist simplifies the concept to its most basic element: thread. Through a series of eight photographs, Ali unwraps a dense tangle of thread

³³ In Ali's conversation with Darrian Douglas on *The Working Artists Podcast*, Ali confirms she is the sitter in the 2015 *Cast No Evil* series.

from around her head and face; in the first image (fig. 4), Ali's face is completely obscured by thread woven many times around; by the final image (fig. 5), only a few strands remain. "I approach *Under Thread* as a citizen of my adoptive land, the United States. I interrogate the audience by asking who is responsible for the wars that we, as a nation, participate in," says Ali.³⁴ As the thread is unwound from Ali's head, the painful impressions of its tension are left behind—they are scars that the artist inflicted upon herself. In utilizing her own body for this series, Ali is able to act as both aggressor and victim, representing her complicity in the atrocities inflicted on her home country while remaining a citizen of the United States and the internal contradictions of transnational identification. In utilizing her own body as subject, even when obscured, Ali becomes "both the photographer and the subject, the observed and the observer."³⁵

³⁴ Lizzy Vartanian Collier, "Cultural Identity Seen Through the Politics of Thread," *Hyperallergic*, April 15, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/493146/alia-ali-borderland-under-thread/>.

³⁵ Ali, Alia, "I Am [NOT]," *Caravan*, 2017, <https://www.oncaravan.org/alia-ali>.



Figure 4. Alia Ali, *I, Under Thread*, 2019, pigment print on photo rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 54 x W. 36 cm.

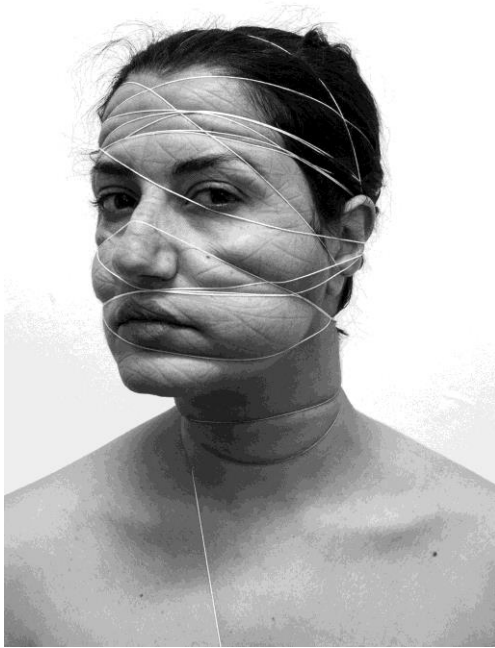


Figure 5. Alia Ali, *VIII, Under Thread*, 2019, pigment print on photo rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 54 x W. 36 cm.

Barthes comments on the specific gift of photographs through their documentary, archival quality to verify the existence of its subject, however momentary. Ali's portraits seem to challenge even that basic notion of reality. With the subject's face and body fully obscured, the existence of a human beneath the shroud cannot even be confirmed. Ali is often operating from a place of erasure, her two countries of origin having been annexed by other territories. Her father's land, South Yemen, was absorbed into the Yemen Arabic Republic in 1990; Yugoslavia, her mother's land, dissolved in 1992 and is now part of Bosnia. Because of this prevalence of disappearance, Ali may be using the "reality" of portraits to fabricate identities and reconstruct the bodies of forgotten peoples, even without identifying them in any specific way. "Who holds the power to create an identity?" Ali asks.³⁶ In decentralizing the identity and persona of their subjects, Neshat and Ali subvert the traditional purpose and practice of portraits and portrait photography, as well as scholarship and reasoning that suggests portraits are meaningful for their direct associations to real people and their once-corporeal existences. These staged images are instead crafted with costume, backdrop, and props and performed by a subject, who in many of their works, are the artists themselves. Not playing themselves, however, the artists create alternative identities—other characters or selves altogether.

The sense of photographic reality is heightened by the artists' deployment of a black and white palette in their works. The monochromatic frames of Neshat's *Women of Allah* series (figs. 2 and 6) and Ali's +/- (figs. 1 and 7) allow for a greater sense of drama, with exaggerated light and shadow. They also apply an inherent sense of age, which elevates their archival quality and in turn their believability as archive. For Neshat and Ali's self-portraits, this aspect in some ways negates their practices of alternate identification by implying a truthfulness to the subjects they

³⁶ Ibid.

associate with themselves, but do not necessarily wish to portray as their own identities. In another sense, however, this affirms the artists' staging of self-portraits as a performative practice that engages with the emergence of memory through remembrance, or the excavation of personal memory through interactions with public history, a concept to be further explicated in the following chapter.

Regardless of the status of the featured sitter—artist or model—the photographic works of Shirin Neshat and Alia Ali reference means of portrait-making and representation in their compositional format. By using their own likenesses, the artists do not offer true self-portraits but rather seek to complicate notions such as self and portrait altogether. In both cases, the artists adduce alternative selves and identities to negotiate the intricacies of multicultural or hybrid identities. Furthermore, in engaging with cultural stereotypes, the artists disrupt the viewer's ability to discern any one represented identity.



Figure 6. Shirin Neshat, *Untitled (Women of Allah)*, 1996, black and white RC print and ink, H. 170 x W. 122 cm, photo by Larry Barns.

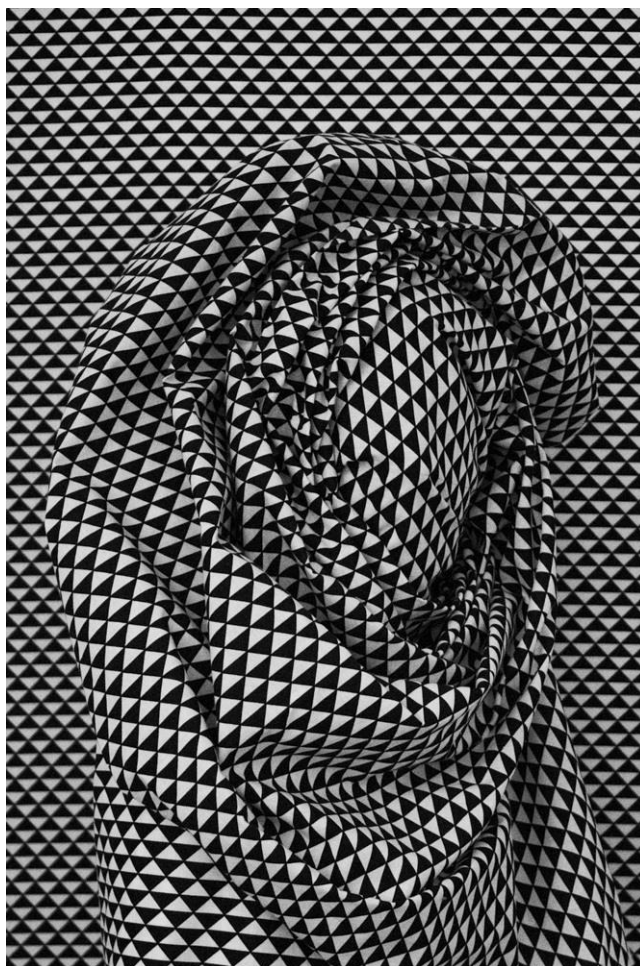


Figure 7. Alia Ali, +\|, 2017, pigment print on cotton rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 107 x W. 72 cm.

Chapter 2. Moving Images: Placing Identity through Film and Video

After the *Women of Allah* series, Neshat moved away from photographic and still images for some time, experimenting instead with multi-channel video works. Three seminal works, sometimes referred to as a trilogy, define Neshat's universe: *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000). These three works have several elements in common: they are all filmed in black and white, they present characters intended to be Iranian, they are coded with the same language as Neshat's photographic series, they separate men and women between two channels of video, and finally, they are poetically constructed—only loosely evocative of narrative. The trilogy represents a clear middle period of experimentation for the artist—one step further than, and perhaps even a continuation of, photographic images, but not yet arrived at the fully developed narrative features that are now indicative of Neshat's practice. It is around this point in Neshat's artistic development that she met her now creative and romantic partner Shoja Azari, who appeared as the male performer in *Turbulent* and has been credited in some fashion in each of Neshat's projects since that time.

Azari's career, on the other hand, has always been rooted in filmmaking. Clearly drawn to durational and narrative images, it is only in the last decade that he has experimented with still images, most of which are also accompanied by video work in some way. In his early artistic career, while still in Iran, Azari worked in stagecraft and as a playwright; later, the artist created several features, such as *K* (2002) and *Windows* (2006).

Neshat's *Rapture* and Azari's *K* were both filmed in Morocco, perhaps sequentially and with the same crew.³⁷ Working frequently with the same group of artists, the pair have spoken

³⁷ Arthur C. Danto, "Pas de Deux, en Masse: Shirin Neshat's *Rapture*," *The Nation*, June 28, 1999, 35.

about the community of artists they have formed in New York City, a great many of whom are Iranian, out of which they “have created a second home or second Iran.”³⁸ As well, many of the team’s works are filmed on location in Morocco as Neshat “tries to make believe that it is Iran,” as she stated to an audience at the Cleveland Film Festival in 2010. As discussed, Neshat and Ali, in staging images with their own bodies and likenesses, use costume, covering, and in Neshat’s case props, to play characters of alternate identities. The characters they present are tangential to their own identities, evidence that the artists use the process of image-making to wrestle with their own issues of identity spurred by feelings of displacement and the state of diasporic living. In their filmic works, Neshat and Azari use alternate settings to recreate an Iran in which the artists might present another narrative, in response to what Neshat calls “an unresolved relationship” with home.³⁹ These alternate Irans that Neshat and Azari create are conceived as a response to the experience of living in exile or diaspora—one that the cultural theorist Hamid Naficy has described as an intense longing for return, and which thus frequently produces “return journey” narratives in art and cinema.⁴⁰ According to Marianne Hirsch, such return journey narratives often “activate remembrance and thus reactivate the trauma of loss,” the body memory engaged by physical place.⁴¹ Unable to return to Iran, however, the artists must make do more imaginatively.⁴² In *Rapture* and *K*, Neshat and Azari stage a return to Iran that activates place memory and allows the artists to contend with their differing personal memories of home.

³⁸ Belgari, “Art to Art,” 90.

³⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁰ Hamid Naficy, “Making Films with an Accent: Iranian Émigré Cinema,” 16.

⁴¹ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 212.

⁴² Belgari, “Art to Art,” 99.

Cinematic Languages

Rapture opens with a wide view of two locations in a desert setting, the right being a desolate land and the left a stone fortress with deep embrasures (fig. 8). At first, the only sound heard is wind whipping through the empty landscape. As the chanting of male voices enters the soundtrack, the left channel fades to an interior of the fortress, revealing a group of men. Meanwhile, female figures in chadors slowly enter the open landscape on the right; the entire frame is filled with the women, grouped together and looking up to the camera. Neshat holds the frame as such for several minutes while action occurs only on the left, by the men (fig. 9). When installed, the two channels face each other from opposite ends of the gallery as Neshat makes the women stand and watch the men, then swaps the shots to have the men gather and watch the women.

The following scenes reaffirm each gender's symbolic association with opposing settings—the fortress as the land of men, and the unencumbered landscape as the realm of women. At the end of the video, the women migrate toward open water, pausing on the beach before sailing off in a boat with no oars. The wind takes the tails of their chadors to make them look like black birds, further evidencing the women's untold freedoms (fig. 10).



Figure 8. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (still), 1999, two-channel video and sound installation, 16 mm film transferred to video, ed. of 5.



Figure 9. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (still), 1999, two-channel video and sound installation, 16 mm film transferred to video, ed. of 5.



Figure 10. Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (still), 1999, gelatin silver print, H. 108 x W. 172 cm.

Neshat separates men and women in several of her films, a fact that may reflect the nature of social customs in Iran, where the sexes are segregated in places like mosques, wedding receptions, or beauty shops. She does this cinematically first by splitting them across two screens, and further by establishing clear differences in their relations to their settings. The men, in their rigidity, are confined to the harsh fortress—an architectural environment that signals war and the rigidity of boundaries—while the women are portrayed in connection to more natural, free, or open spaces.

While this dichotomy may appear to reinforce the binary structure by which gender is often socialized, Neshat has, in fact, worked to reverse gender roles in Iranian society throughout this and other works. Typically, men are considered to have more freedom in public space, while restrictions on women are far more stringent. Neshat has commented numerous times about the Western perception of the veil as a symbol of oppression, when in actuality veils are quite freeing for many Iranian women, as it is the act of covering that allows their presence in

society.⁴³ Moreover, Neshat's central memories of Iranian life are of a time when women possessed many more freedoms—in education, modesty, individuality—than they experience under the establishment of Iran's current theocracy. By presenting a horde of women in chadors, who are intertwined with a Western-perceived symbol of oppression, yet unbound by structure or location, the artist presents two sides of the same coin: an image that is critical of the oppressive elements of Iranian life (especially for women) but is also empowered by that identity, and is nostalgic for Iran. In so doing, Neshat both repositions her own memories into a contemporary image or archive and also corrects the Western image of the Iranian woman.

Azari's film *K* adapts three stories of Franz Kafka: *The Married Couple*, *In the Penal Colony*, and *A Fratricide*, written in 1922, 1914, and 1916, respectively. As there is no natural connection between the stories, they were never so closely juxtaposed until Azari's film. Themes of violence, gender roles, despotism, and complicity from the three stories, while written by Kafka on a broad level, evoke references to specific events and cultural norms in Iranian history and life when brought out by Azari's selections.

The empty desert wasteland where *In the Penal Colony* is set appears similarly in its landscape and structures to the desert and fortress where Neshat's *Rapture* occurs (fig. 11). Since the stories of Kafka are more like parables and not tied in their writing to any specific location, Azari's reuse of Neshat's setting—which Neshat specifically chose to model as Iran—seems to link the content of *K* more directly to Azari's Iran. The story follows a soldier who is ordered to salute the closed door of his leader's chamber every hour—a fruitless task of blind allegiance. After falling asleep at his post, the soldier is condemned to imprisonment in the desert landscape until his execution by a complex torture machine at the hands of the Officer.

⁴³ Ebrahimi, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora*, 110.

As the Officer prepares the torture machine, which kills its victim over twelve hours by inscribing their offense into their skin, he is questioned by the Traveler, who has been essentially commissioned by the new Commandant (assumed to be leader of the land) to investigate the torture practice and make a case either for its continuation or abolishment. The machine is shot in wide angles, thrusting skyward into a presumably blue sky, cast gray in the noir effect, with cumulous clouds scattered in the distance (fig. 12). It rises far above any hill or mountain in view, suggesting this colony's subjugation of the landscape, its control over the land, the Earth, and therefore its men with the use of this technology. Kafka's text describes the machine in great detail but Azari's version is sculptural, futuristic but campy.

Towards the middle of the story, the Officer imagines a scene in which the Commandant will try to win the Traveler's favor. The scene opens on a misty party full of giggling prostitutes. A window casts ambient light down onto the Traveler, who is seated at a table centered below. Prostitutes feed him from a whole lamb or goat and tilt wine glasses to his lips. With this smoky interior scene, Azari further indicates a recognizably Iranian setting as he pays homage to the exotic vision of the Middle East that Western visual culture has established. By supplying this exotic fantasy to a character within the Iranian context, Azari comments further on the political movements of Iran since the Iranian Revolution in which state-provided "liberalization" really only repeats Iran's past.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, *Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 8.



Figure 11. Shoja Azari, *K* (still), 2002.



Figure 12. Shoja Azari, *K* (still), 2002.

Overall, *K* adopts the *film noir* aesthetic. *Noir* is a visual style which Sam Rohdie describes as “a night-time film where shadows and murky greys predominate. Dim reflections and shimmering electric lights create an unstable, uneasy, disquieting space, a nightmare world

of insecurity and danger.”⁴⁵ But *noir* is also tied to certain types of stories and is a philosophy as much as it is an aesthetic. Borne out of wartime and post-war mentalities, and derived somewhat out of German films from the 1920s, “these films starkly differentiated them[selves] from the standard Hollywood register of high key optimism” of the pre-war era, according to Barry Langford.⁴⁶ Orson Welles, a prominent figure of American *film noir*, also made a *noir* film after Kafka: 1962’s *The Trial*. Rodhie suggests that Welles’ brand of *noir* “is broken and incoherent...the mannerism of his compositions, the discords created by his editing, the mismatch between sound and image...make the films difficult and uneasy.”⁴⁷ Given Azari’s awareness of film history and technique, it is likely that in his adaptation of the style he references not only the overall genre of *film noir*, but Welles’ particular *noir*.

“It’s always like this endless absurd cycle that humanity is caught in and it keeps repeating and repeating and repeating,” Azari says of Kafka.⁴⁸ In a catalogue essay for Azari’s 2010 exhibition *Icons*, Iranian Studies scholar Hamid Dabashi says that Azari re-signifies images historical to Persian culture to reflect the issues of present-day Iran.⁴⁹ In his cinematic collaborations with Shirin Neshat, Azari has also addressed the Iranian coup d’état of 1953 as a means of discussing the 1979 Iranian Revolution as well as contemporary times. Benjamin Genocchio says Azari is “interested in the confusion and stickiness of life, and the ways in which

⁴⁵ Sam Rohdie, “Film Noir,” *Film Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 75.

⁴⁶ Barry Langford, “Film Noir,” *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 214.

⁴⁷ Rodhie, “Film Noir,” 76,

⁴⁸ “Shoja Azari with Phong Bui.”

⁴⁹ Hamid Dabashi, “Shoja Azari: Making the Homely Unhomely,” *Shoja Azari: Icons* (New York: Leila Heller Gallery, 2010).

the past is constantly interacting with the present,” or as the artist puts it, “layers of reality.”⁵⁰

Azari, too, uses the off-beat writings of Kafka and the unsettling non-reality of Wellesian film noir to interact with the ugly realities of contemporary life.

Film and Diaspora: Restaging Memories

A further issue is what draws Neshat and Azari to the filmic medium at all. Particularly for Neshat, whose career made a clear cinematic turn, the use of film is significant over any other medium. The moving image can be seen as an expansion of the photographic image for these artists—a place to speak more in the work’s process than in its final image. For Azari, who clearly engages heavily with film theory and philosophy, this means building layers of images and scenes to reflect the “layers of reality” that he depicts.⁵¹ For Neshat, the moving image expands her universe. In turning away from still images, and those appropriating her own body, Arthur C. Danto quotes Neshat: “I had an immense desire to learn how to tell stories to my audience.”⁵² Having established the characters of her artistic world, the artist’s moving images then reveal Neshat’s own learning process in storytelling and world-building, as she experiments with contemporary Iran and the character of the contemporary Iranian woman.

Terry Smith says of Neshat’s early video works, “This work is typical of the kind of contemporary art that locates itself at the emotional core of a culture that seems to have nothing that is contemporary about it,” yet another contradiction underscored in Neshat’s practice.⁵³ Smith places Neshat’s films in the realm of gender work: grappling with not only the Middle

⁵⁰ Benjamin Genocchio, “Shoja Azari: Keep the Faith,” *Shoja Azari: Icons* (New York: Leila Heller Gallery, 2010).

⁵¹ Genocchio, “Keep the Faith.”

⁵² Danto, “Shirin Neshat and the Concept of the Absolute Spirit,” 13.

⁵³ Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 689.

Eastern or Muslim woman, but women in general as the gender advances.⁵⁴ For Smith, Neshat's turn to the moving image is a choice specifically of contemporaneity, Smith's term that obviously means "of the now," but also inextricable from the present, in all its stickiness and contradictions.⁵⁵ Especially as Neshat's work experiments with installation, her moving image-making seeks to relocate Iran and its perception of backwardness—a product of Orientalism—into contemporaneity with a medium that feels undoubtedly contemporary.

Mehraneh Ebrahimi, a scholar mainly of comparative literature, cites Susan Sontag's theory of photographs as "memory freeze frames" to access Neshat's motives in creating, and performing photographs. She says: "The safe distance of an image and the absence or presence of violence contained in the frame allow for the working of the faculty of judgment."⁵⁶ In a film, however, there is no distance; the viewer is constantly fed image after image and must work to string their understandings together rather than interpret a single frame. According to Azari, summarizing Eisenstein, "The purpose of montage is to stimulate the viewer's intellectual faculty to arrive at meanings embedded within the very logic of the edit, pointing to particular ideas and concepts."⁵⁷ If the montage theory is correct, then the moving image finds its purpose not in those individual images, but the sum total.

On a more global scale, the 2000 publication *The Skin of the Film* from Laura U. Marks provides an in-depth examination of what she terms "intercultural cinema" and the ways in which artists—mainly living in diaspora—use cinema to explore their experiences through tumult and exile. As Marks describes it, "intercultural cinema is constituted around a particular

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 696.

⁵⁶ Ebrahimi, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora*, 90.

⁵⁷ Shoja Azari, "Perceptual Dislocation," *Shirin Neshat: Women Without Men*, (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2011), 9.

crisis: the directly political discrepancy between official history and ‘private’ memory.”⁵⁸ Her case studies include examples where histories are reimagined through narrative in the present day, or where absence is used to draw focus to a nonexistent archive—examples where filmmakers use the moving image to reposition their own histories, which have been defined by “displacement and hybridity.”⁵⁹

Of works created from Iranian diaspora, Ebrahimi says that, “in offering differences, [artists] remind their audiences of the similarities between the experiences of pleasure, of pain, of Others, and the self.”⁶⁰ For those living in a state of exile, the sense of a home lost is always present—the memory of the past exists concurrently with the new reality of the present, as Edward Said says.⁶¹ When considering common uses for photography today and throughout history, as well as Barthes’s writings, memory is clearly intertwined with the photographic medium and process. To further unpack the myriad of films that Marks discusses in *The Skin of the Film*, she first attempts to resolve ideas surrounding memory and images of Bergson, Proust, Deleuze, and Benjamin.⁶² Invoking the dialectic that Proust establishes between voluntary and involuntary memory, as well as what Benjamin simply describes as remembrance and memory, respectively, Marks says:

Unlike remembrance... (involuntary) memory aims not to protect impressions but to disintegrate them. Remembrance actually shields consciousness from experience. Remembrance is thus very much like the built-up layers of virtual images that compose official history. In contrast, memory, one might say, deterritorializes remembrance. It takes a shock to unroot a memory, to revive a

⁵⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁰ Ebrahimi, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora*, 5.

⁶¹ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 148.

⁶² Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 63-64.

flow of experience...The moments when memory returns and stories can finally be told are moments when a collective [diaspora] begins to find its voice.⁶³

Following on Proust and Benjamin, then, Marks suggests that artists living in diaspora often suppress *memory* in favor of *remembrance*, leading to a hybridity of images pulled from “official history” and perhaps the idealized version of their homes.

For Neshat and Azari, who are barred from visiting Iran and their families precisely because of the statements they make in their work, the ability to return home on screen or on set is the only achievable return journey for the foreseeable future. As Azari’s invocation of montage theory suggests, the particular allure of cinematic works to intercultural artists living in diaspora is the ability to layer multiple truths—multiple realities—into one image: to render exile’s “discontinuous state of being” continuous once more, at least on screen.⁶⁴

⁶³ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁴ Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 140.

Chapter 3. Memory and Remembrance

While Neshat, Azari, and Ali, in their works discussed thus far, possess similarities in both aesthetics and medium, the three artists are joined on a larger scale by their experiences of displacement and exile, which result in works characterized by hybrid and transnational narratives. Using texts from Islam and Persian literature, images from Persian history and life, and textiles from a multitude of cultures, Neshat, Azari, and Ali speak to both past and present simultaneously.

In a sense, it is because they have experienced life in diaspora that the artists are able to interact with multiple histories without much effort. Marked by a sense of hybrid belongings and identities, yet a lack of real connection to any singular sense of place, these artists naturally incorporate intercultural narratives into their works, even as they appropriate symbols, images, and texts from only one. To return to Marks: in this process of excavation through appropriation, “intercultural works redeem these stranded images by bringing them into the very present, even into the body of the viewer.”⁶⁵ While Marks specifically refers to the grounding abilities of symbolic objects in films to intimate the personal connection to those objects, which she calls “fossil-like,” Neshat, Ali, and Azari do the same with images, symbols, and texts.⁶⁶ Not physical objects, these are still consumable and have the power to become intensely personal and connected to memory. In appropriating texts, images, and textiles, the artists not only gain an increased sense of closeness with their cultures, but also awaken memories. It is in juxtaposing these media, which each have universal associations, against each other and against

⁶⁵ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

contemporary media, that the individual stories of each artist—Marks’ private memory—is revealed and recoded into a new official history.

Neshat: Traditions Old and New

Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series implements the artist’s key symbols of Iranian women, most obviously the chador, but it is her engagement with Persian and Shiite texts through the calligraphic tradition that transcends stereotype and cuts deeper to the actual Iranian experience. The artist’s practice of calligraphy is obviously connected to a longstanding tradition in Islamic cultures. Mosques are famously devoid of any iconography, decorated instead with lilting Arabic and Farsi script, coiling vegetal designs, and interlocking geometries. Neshat’s own hometown, Qazvin, boasts many such sites and is called Iran’s “calligraphy capital” and a “city of ornaments” by tourist sites.⁶⁷

Neshat’s use of calligraphy, however, is rooted in a more complicated history that references applications of calligraphy beyond solely ancient tradition. Decades before her calligraphic references, Iranian modernists of the 1960s and ‘70s, too, rediscovered the use of calligraphy through newly built museums, manuscripts and print matter, and the building decoration of downtown Tehran.⁶⁸ Already aware of Western modernism, Hamid Keshmirshekan notes, “Iranian avant-garde artists...were caught between two polarities—traditionalism and modernism.”⁶⁹ Artists such as Parviz Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram combined Farsi characters with austere colors and forms to transform the ancient calligraphic traditions into symbols of modernism (figs. 13-14). The Iranian modernists approached calligraphy as a means of

⁶⁷ “Travel Guide to Qazvin,” *Stranger in Tehran*, November, 27, 2016.

⁶⁸ Layla S. Diba, “Iranian Modernism: Infrastructure and Inspiration,” *Asia Society* (August 29, 2013), video interview.

⁶⁹ Hamid Keshmirshekan, “Neo-Traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The ‘Saqqakhaneh School in the 1960s,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 4 (December 2005): 608.

abstraction, as opposed to signification.⁷⁰ Neshat's use of calligraphy, while in no way visually abstracted, surely references this usage of text in Iranian modernism, especially as the text itself is sourced, in fact, from Iranian modernist literature; many of the *Women of Allah* images feature the poetry of feminist writer Forugh Farrokhzad.⁷¹ And while often misinterpreted as Quaranic texts, poetic secular texts are equally essential to Iranian life as religious ones.⁷²



Figure 13. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech*, 1972, bronze on wood base, Grey Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Gray, G1975.54.

⁷⁰ Layla S. Diba, "Iranian Modernism."

⁷¹ Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, "Every Frame A Photograph: Shirin Neshat in Conversation," *Border Crossings*, March 2009.

⁷² Mahnaz Afkhami, "'Sunlight, Open Windows, and Fresh Air': The Struggle for Women's Rights in Iran," *Shirin Neshat: Facing History*, ed. Melissa Ho (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2015), 39.

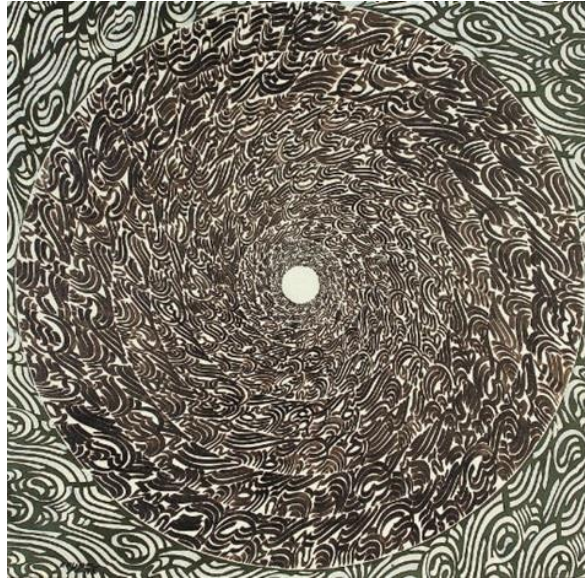


Figure 14. Faramarz Pilaram, *Untitled*, 1972, oil on canvas, H. 119 x W. 120 cm.
Private collection.

The writings of Farrokhzad are well known to Iranian eyes and further cast Neshat's characters in these works with the role of rebel, as Farrokhzad was considered controversial for writing from the female perspective and explicitly referencing female sexuality.⁷³ An *Untitled Women of Allah* photograph from 1996 (fig. 6) sources its inscriptions from Farrokhzad's poem "I Feel Sorry for the Garden," which, for Neshat, comments on the neglect of women in Iranian society.⁷⁴ The same poem, however, was used in the 1980s by students in Tehran protesting Iran's theocracy.⁷⁵ Neshat combines those inscriptions and their variable applications to Iranian life with texts from the Shiite religion, further juxtaposing secular and religious themes and the blending of those aspects of life in post-Revolution Iran. In these ways, Neshat's interaction with language is multifocal. She uses the aesthetic, decorative quality of calligraphy and its references to Persian and Islamic imagery; the intertwining of ancient and modern in Iranian modernism's

⁷³ Enright and Walsh, "Every Frame a Photograph."

⁷⁴ Ebrahimi, *Women, Art, and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora*, 118.

⁷⁵ Jasmin Darznik, "Forough Goes West: Forough Farrokhzad in Iranian Diasporic Art and Literature," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 108.

appropriation of calligraphy; and the actual content of her appropriated texts to hold an open conversation between disparate histories.

Azari: History and Modernity

Azari's use of source texts is naturally more theatrical, as he approaches them from a filmmaker's adaptive lens. The artist adapts literature to the screen in a somewhat traditional manner in *K*, but Azari also adapts stories, written or not, into works in the *Icons* series of 2010 and *The Day of the Last Judgment (Coffee House Painting)* of 2009. Both works appropriate commonly seen artworks in Iran and combine their associated oral legends with contemporary stories from news media, referencing the deaths of Iranian protestors and violent American interventions in the Middle East.⁷⁶ By collating contemporary concerns with historic narratives and imagery, Azari "creates a space in which radically different histories rub up against one [an]other."⁷⁷

Azari further combines discordant images in the short film *The King of Black*, which was first produced for the 2013 exhibition *FAKE: Idyllic Life*. The film is based on *Haft Peykar*, a Persian epic poem by Nizami Ganjavi, in which a king throws his domain into a perpetual state of mourning essentially on a whim. Azari transforms the tale by juxtaposing black-clad mourners with brightly colored backdrops. More specifically, Azari co-opts landscapes from real Persian miniature paintings as his backdrops and superimposes video footage of live actors atop the stills. In the exhibition's catalogue, Alexandra Keller writes that "Azari emphasizes, even exacerbates, the difference between the aesthetic of the miniature and that of the live action

⁷⁶ Dabashi, "Making the Homely Unhomely."

⁷⁷ Negar Azimi, "Tall Tales," *FAKE: Idyllic Life: New Works by Shoja Azari* (New York: Leila Heller Gallery, 2011).

film,” going on to quote Azari as he likens miniatures to storyboards.⁷⁸ In the *Banquette of Houries* still (fig. 16), a scene depicting the Seven Beauties of the source text’s title, contemporary figures strewn about modern cushions and textiles are grounded on an ancient painting of seafoam green hills hosting wild vines and cherry blossoms, which is then again superimposed over a contemporary depiction of planets moving about the galaxy. The combination creates a disorienting mixture of reality and fantasy that simultaneously comments on Orientalism and current Iranian affairs.



Figure 15. Shoja Azari, *Banquette of Houries (King of Black)*, 2013, lenticular 3D depth on acrylic sheet, H. 76 x W. 105 cm.

According to Keller, Azari “often thinks about what images meant to people before digitalization, before mass reproduction, before print. His work engages with the very idea of

⁷⁸ Alexandra Keller, “Time, History, and Intermediation: Shoja Azari’s *The King of Black*,” *FAKE: Idyllic Life: New Works by Shoja Azari* (New York: Leila Heller Gallery, 2013).

media even as it complicates ideas of history and culture.”⁷⁹ The artist clearly considers the implications of his chosen media and intertwines the message of its content with the inherent meaning or associations of its medium, evidenced by his mixture of painting and video in *The King of Black* and even in *K*, as the film noir style certainly carries with it another set of implications.

In another series created for *FAKE: Idyllic Life*, sometimes called his *Orientalist* series, Azari commissioned classical painters to create copies of famous Orientalist oil paintings, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme’s 1879 work *The Snake Charmer* and Eugène Delacroix’s 1838 work *The Fanatics of Tangier*. However, these are not perfect copies: Azari changes certain details to heighten the Orientalizing nature of these works and make reference to the ways in which contemporary media continue to Orientalize the Middle East. In *The Snake Charmer or The Anatomy of a 21st Century Savage* (fig. 17) the artist arms the onlookers with Kalashnikov rifles; enchanted by the charmer’s techniques, one of the rifles floats in midair.⁸⁰ The *Fanatics*, of Azari’s *Fanatics of Tangier or The Muslim Rage* (fig. 18), appear to burn an American flag amidst chaos in the street. Behind each painting, however, Azari adds another layer of communication with American media by wallpapering the gallery with large printouts of Google Image searches using combinations like “Iran + terrorism” that produce hundreds of images each.⁸¹

By pairing historically Orientalizing paintings with contemporary images associated with the same region, Azari simultaneously confronts the historically exoticizing act of Orientalism and the reverse-idealization of the Middle East by the West in the wake of 9/11, the war in

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Azimi, “Tall Tales.”

⁸¹ Ibid.

Afghanistan, and continued U.S. occupation throughout the region, including contemporary images of war and terrorism. In *K*, while confronting these ideas more abstractly, Azari still addresses issues associated with Islam such as cruel punishments and unwavering adherence to law, as well as more political themes surrounding the Islamic Republic, such as the dangers of blind nationalism, and retention of old practices. Because *K* was produced for a Western audience—debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival, and shown primarily in this “film scene” setting—Azari’s tone is both confrontational to the Orientalizing audience and self-critical of the issues that remain within Iran and the Islamic Republic.⁸² Like Neshat, Azari also chooses Kafka for his works’ specific significance to Iran.⁸³

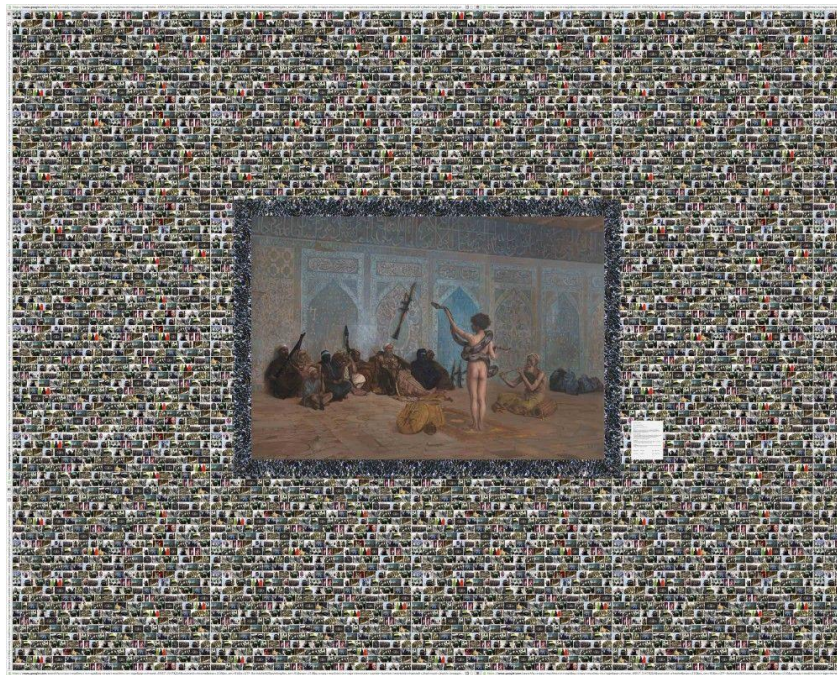


Figure 16. Shoja Azari, *The Snake Charmer or the Anatomy of the 21st Century Savage*, 2013, oil on canvas, H. 147 x W. 102 cm.

⁸² Belgari, “Art to Art,” 94.

⁸³ “Shoja Azari with Phong Bui.”

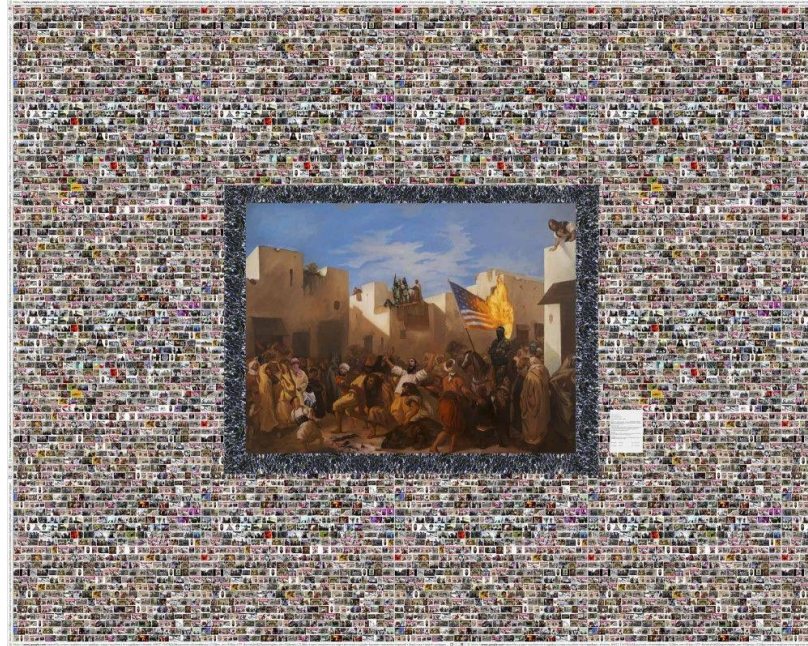


Figure 17. Shoja Azari, *Fanatics of Tangier or The Muslim Rage*, 2013, oil on canvas, H. 158 x W. 208 cm.

Ali: Language of Textile

While not appropriating actual texts as Neshat and Azari do, Ali's use of textiles similarly engages with language—here, the language of culture and identity as expressed through threaded and woven pattern. Textiles evoke a multitude of meanings, including the many ways by which fashion or dress can outwardly define one's identity in terms of culture, religious affiliation, or gender-identification. On a larger scale, Ali engages with textile's inherent connection with identity, the body, and everyday life. "Textile is significant to us all. We are born into it, we sleep in it, we eat on it, we define ourselves by it, we shield ourselves with it, and, eventually, we die in it," says Ali.⁸⁴ Her images do not present just one identity, but are inclusive to many identities and cultures, referencing the hybrid cultural expressions embedded in wax print fabrics from post-colonial West Africa, or Islamic identities and the politics of gender with a variety of

⁸⁴ Ali, Artist Statement.

coverings. These varied associations are synchronous with Ali's self-identification as an intercultural subject, who is incapable of identifying with any one label; she describes herself as "a female artist who exists on the borders of identifying as West Asian/Eastern European/North American and culturally Muslim/spiritually independent."⁸⁵

I am [Not] is a photographic series created for an exhibition in which thirty-one female Middle Eastern artists responded to the prompt "I am" and the specifically female experience as peacemaker within the complicated cultural, political, and religious circumstances of the region.⁸⁶ Following Ali's stylistic convention, the images of *I am [Not]* (figs. 18-19) feature a figure gratuitously shrouded in textile and staged in a traditional portrait pose, despite their identity being completely concealed. Rather than use commercial textiles, however, Ali uses a roll fabricated from thin, long strips of newspaper sewn together like the spines of books. The roll is much shorter than a traditional textile with a width of 45 to 60 inches, which requires Ali to wrap herself many times over in order to be fully covered. The fabric collage is also more rigid than an actual textile, creating an angular, sculptural effect that brings even the body itself into question. In three of the images, Ali includes her full body in the frame, along with the remaining roll of textile, which sits upright at her feet as though ready to continue covering the artist.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ali, "I am [Not]."



Figure 18. Alia Ali, *I Am [NOT]*, 2017, pigment print on cotton rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 107 x W. 72 cm.



Figure 19. Alia Ali, *I Am [NOT]*, 2017, pigment print on cotton rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 165 x W. 110 cm.

The result is markedly less evocative of cultural dress and style than Ali's other images, which is consistent with Ali's declaration of self (or *not* self) in these images. Even while the artist may very well be the model for her other images, the generic commercial textiles and broad swaths of fabric only loosely resembling a specific style present a sort of universal, anonymous woman. In dressing herself (and identifying the images as such), Ali transgresses her own language and uses an unconventional material that instead embodies the language of the media. Not unlike Neshat's stereotypes of *Women of Allah* and Azari's Google search wallpaper, Ali's construction of a textile from mass media materials references the tense relationship between

homes and identities for artists in Middle Eastern diaspora, as they survive in the apathetic and often Islamophobic West.

Extrapolating Stuart Hall's communication theory "Encoding/Decoding," depictions of real events in mass media remove those events, people, and places from their reality, as the media can only produce signification, or images.⁸⁷ In the process of signification, "broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse...Before this message can have an 'effect,' satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use,' it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded."⁸⁸ Or, in the process of media dissemination, the authoring party decodes a historical event, stripping it to the points most relevant to its audience, then encodes (or perhaps recodes) the images to further emphasize that "meaningful discourse." In the case of Western depictions of the Middle East, this means that an entire region of diverse cultures and practices are encoded with perceptions most relevant to the West, resulting in images of terrorism, radical Islam, and oppressive religious practices, as Azari's Google search wallpaper highlights so specifically. In *I Am [Not]*, Ali juxtaposes the practice of encoding and decoding in media images with the idea of encoding oneself with dress, style, and covering.

In her statement for the series, the artist says, "To label oneself is to willingly cast oneself into a static mold; yet, each day, as we respond both to major events and minute decisions, we recast who we are by discovering who we are not."⁸⁹ By stating explicitly that that which covers her does not define her, Ali dissociates herself from any assumed identity impressed upon her by images of the Middle East and Yemen in Western media. Marked by her intercultural heritage

⁸⁷ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham, Caroline Bassett, Paul Morris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 29.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁹ Ali, "I Am [NOT]."

and further travels and experiences through adulthood, Ali refuses identification by any one culture or label. And although Ali identifies with a multitude of cultural backgrounds or nationalities, she fully covers herself—declining to connect her image with the cultures represented in cloth.

This theme of multiplicity persists throughout Ali's works—as an exploration of multiple identities, as mentioned, but also as an exploration of textile as language. To push this concept even further, Ali shifts away from human-as-subject to textile-as-subject. In her series *Borderland*, Ali photographed textiles from eleven regions across the globe, including her grandmother's collection of traditional Yemeni dresses (fig. 20).⁹⁰ Unlike her other textile portrait works in which the body of the subject is evident and prioritized, the composition of Ali's *Borderland* photographs vary greatly. The series includes some of the portrait-style compositions that have come to define Ali's oeuvre, but also close-up images of folds and drapery in the textile and images in which the figure is so loosely draped in a textile that matches the photograph's background that the body is hardly visible.

⁹⁰ Collier, "Cultural Identity Seen Through the Politics of Thread."



Figure 20. Alia Ali, *Borderland*, 2017, pigment print on cotton rag, ed. of 5 plus 1 A/P and 1 E/P, H. 107 x W. 72 cm.

“A traditional textile conveys to the knowing eye a great deal about not only the creators, but also about those for whom it is created.”⁹¹ Many Indian words are derived from the terminology of textiles and the tools used to create them; colors and patterns signify specific meanings that differ across cultures; even the root word of textile—text—points toward a relationship between textile and language.⁹² Ali, whose parents are linguists, clearly understands

⁹¹ Dasleen Dhamija, “Textile: The Non-Verbal Language,” *Global Textile Encounters*, ed. Mary-Louise Nosch, Zhao Feng, Lotika Varadarajan (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 304.

⁹² *Ibid.*

the power of communication between textiles and their direct relation to texts.⁹³ “My own multilingual lens has shown me how language can be a form of misinterpretation rather than a means of understanding,” says the artist. In centering textiles as her primary motif, Ali emphasizes their linguistic capabilities. This highlights the cultural associations of specific textiles while simultaneously criticizing the ability of textiles to project an unintentional message or assumed identity.

Neshat, Ali, and Azari’s close engagements with images, texts, and stories referential to specific cultures is suggestive of an excavatory process in which each artist revisits unresolved issues with their place of origin by reconnecting to it in as many ways possible through consumable media. Azari combines traditional Persian imagery with contemporary images and references to elicit criticism of both sides. In the reverse, Neshat uses one motif to reference both Persian traditions and modernisms. Ali, in her engagement with textiles, makes reference to specific cultures as well as the broader ability of textiles to act as a language. I have discussed the reconstructive abilities of performance through self-portraits or substituted return journeys through film, but the works and concepts discussed here push this notion further, into the reparative capabilities of an artistic process more generally.

This process of appropriation is partially in service of building an Islamic contemporaneity.⁹⁴ A key component of contemporary Orientalism is the perception of Asia as “timeless,” as Vishakha Desai says, outdated and ancient compared to the forward-minded

⁹³ Ali, Artist Statement.

⁹⁴ Sussan Babaie, “Voices of Authority: Locating the ‘Modern’ in ‘Islamic’ Arts,” *Getty Research Journal*, no. 3. (2011): 133.

West.⁹⁵ Speaking of the development of Iranian contemporary art mainly by artists living in diaspora, Sussan Babaie says:

These artists join the graphic artists of the revolutionary phase in Iran in utilizing familiar motifs and visual strategies as if they were hypertext, generating intersecting mental, textual, visual, and performative meanings legible to the culturally trained eye...There they perform a mediatory role, charging a broadened social discourse and acting as a metalink, a gestural link, in the visual culture of contemporary Iran.⁹⁶

However, Babaie is critical of this discourse, and the “ethnicizing” ways in which these works are exhibited, asking instead that they be considered simultaneously in a broader historical context and in a more local one (than simply “Islamic” or “Muslim”).⁹⁷ Neshat, Ali, and Azari do just that; in engaging with the cultural language of the Middle East through the appropriation of images, literature, and textiles, the artists ask their viewers to consider at once a broader view of the Middle East, unbound from media-fueled Western perceptions, and the artists or their subjects as individuals, as the works are imbued with their private memories *of* such official histories.

⁹⁵ Vsihakha N. Desai, “Beyond the ‘Authentic-Exotic’: Collecting Contemporary Asian Art in the Twenty-first Century (2005),” *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, ed. Melissa Chiu, Benjamin Gennochio (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 180.

⁹⁶ Babaie, “Voices of Authority,” 139.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

Conclusion

The artistic practices of Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, and Alia Ali are clearly joined by many factors. They are all of Middle Eastern descent, meaning their cultural histories and personal experiences have comprised forms of erasure, political transformation, and exile; they work in photographic and filmic media, which project a unique association with truth; and they focus on bodily subjects with narrative veins. After digging deeper and considering the three artists' work and lives in connection with one another, their bonds are even clearer.

Shirin Neshat's photographic series *Women of Allah* and Alia Ali's +\- coopt traditional forms of photographic portraits in order to recreate new identities for their Iranian and Yemeni woman, respectively. Not truly portraits in the sense that the images depict the essence or core of a person's unique identity, Neshat and Ali instead imagine stereotypes or anonymous women. This practice is evidenced in Neshat's work by her very explicit visual language, which is simplified to Farsi script, the chador veil, and guns, all symbols which also have heavy connotations in Western media. David Lawton suggests that Neshat's focused, confrontational images of a portrait style provide a point of empathy toward the Iranian woman for her Western audience. But the artist complicates the portrait even further by including her own likeness. This adaptation of the self-portrait—again, a false one—allows Neshat to step into an alternate role, in a world where Neshat participated in the Revolution. Ali's method is directly opposite; by completely covering her subjects, she removes any means by which an audience might assume an identity or invent a stereotype. Ali's series *Under Thread*, which transgresses her typical textile mode, reveals herself as the subject: "both the photographer and the subject, the observed and the observer," revealing the contradictory nature of diasporic life.⁹⁸ In these ways, Shirin

⁹⁸ Ali, "I am [Not]."

Neshat and Alia Ali engage with the representation of hybrid identities by creating identities through their images, recoding the archive of Middle Eastern women.

Following *Women of Allah*, Neshat produced a series of video works. It was in this era that Neshat and Azari began working together. Where Neshat and Ali perform alternate identities in their photographs, Neshat and Azari use the filmic medium to stage alternate places—alternate Irans. In filming Neshat’s *Rapture* and parts of Azari’s *K* in Morocco as a way to visually mimic Iran, the artists also find means of making a return journey. In staging these characters, settings, and events, the artists reawaken and perform memories. As Laura Marks notes, intercultural cinema is marked by the struggle between “official history” and “private memory.” By engaging with elements of the former, Neshat and Azari awaken the latter and find another method of recoding.

In *Women of Allah*’s appropriation of the calligraphic tradition and Iranian modernist texts, Shirin Neshat uses culturally-specific media to join disparate histories. Likewise, Azari appropriates common Persian imagery and texts with contemporary Western depictions of Iran; Ali combines contemporary and traditional textiles and styles of dress, using the language of textiles surrounding identity. Just as with their characters and settings, in working through the appropriated media—which, too, hold broader associations—the artists excavate deeper memories and connections. In juxtaposing Middle Eastern media with contemporary references, and contemporary media such as video installation, the artists work toward an Islamic contemporary. In this way, they battle the Orientalist notion of non-Western “backwardness” and reveal the region as capable of a contemporaneity all its own. Their new archive is then inclusive of narratives ancient and new, broad and personal.

Neshat, Azari, and Ali seek, in their work, to uncover and unveil memories through their interactions with the signifiers of culture and identity. As artists impacted by exile and diaspora, their own identities are hybridized and made contradictory as they live in a world that often demonizes or conflicts with their home states. By staging expected images or appropriating loaded media, the artists disintegrate their associations with the “official” narrative and reconstruct new images that reflect more holistic identities and stories. The artists give new power to photography and film with these constructive, reparative practices. In the era of disinformation, the works of Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, and Alia Ali are a refreshing turn; while in staging images they perhaps prey on humanity’s undeniable attraction to photographs and images, they in turn offer a means of staging truths.

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